

Capitol Comments: Unsung "saints" abound in our school communities

By Margaret McGettrick, Director of Education, Texas Catholic Conference Education Department

On July 26, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI prayed with the faithful gathered near his chalet at Les Combes where he was spending a vacation. Being the feast day of Sts. Joachim and Anna, parents of the Virgin Mary and grandparents of Jesus, Benedict XVI invited people to "pray for grandparents who, in families, are the depositories and often witnesses of the fundamental values of life. The educational role of grandparents is always important, and becomes even more important when, for various reasons, parents are unable to ensure an adequate presence alongside their children as they are growing." He entrusted all the grandparents of the world to the protection of Sts. Joachim and Anna.

It has become an increasing trend that more and more grandparents are becoming "recycled parents" by taking on the daily responsibilities of raising their grandchildren. In her book "Grandfamilies: Grandparents Raising Grandchildren," Katy Abel writes, "So much for spoiling them rotten, then sending them back to their parents. Grandparenting is not what it used to be. At a time when most expect to enjoy the fruit of their life's labor, growing numbers of senior citizens find they are saddled with a burden they never expected to bear: caring for their own children's children."

According to a 2000 U.S. Census Bureau report, 2.4 million grandparents had primary responsibility for their co-resident grandchildren younger than 18; among grandparent caregivers, 39 percent had cared for their grandchildren for 5 or more years.

The joy that grandchildren bring to our lives is very enriching, but for those who are raising their grandchildren, other factors seem to bring a variety of challenges. In a Time magazine article, "Recycled Parents," Deborah Edler Brown writes: "Isolation is a common complaint among second-time parents, social lives dwindle, late-life dreams get put on hold, while the expenses of child rearing create new financial challenges. One grandfather came out of retirement when he acquired three new mouths to feed. Now 75, he works nights and sleeps during the day with a 30-mile commute. There is also emotional fallout; fear of losing a child to dysfunctional parents, grief at losing the grandparent role and anger at the adult child who won't parent. And there is the simple reality of age."

How do our schools welcome and work with these new grandparents? While dining recently with my *comadre*, Virginia Sanchez, our conversation centered on this very topic. Virginia has been working at SS. Cyril and Methodius Catholic School in Corpus Christi for the past thirty years and remarked on how much she admired one woman at the school. The woman experienced health issues, financial pressures, and the loss of her husband while trying to provide her grandchildren with a Catholic education. She was an example of whom Benedict XVI described as a "witness of the fundamental values of life." The SS. Cyril & Methodius Catholic School community in turn reached out to the woman with tuition assistance and moral support, as well as food and gifts when she had no money for Christmas.

The late Karl Menninger once said "The central purpose of each life should be to dilute the misery in the world." What wonderful examples of unsung "saints" we have in these truly holy people.